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Women, war and rape

Compiler's comments

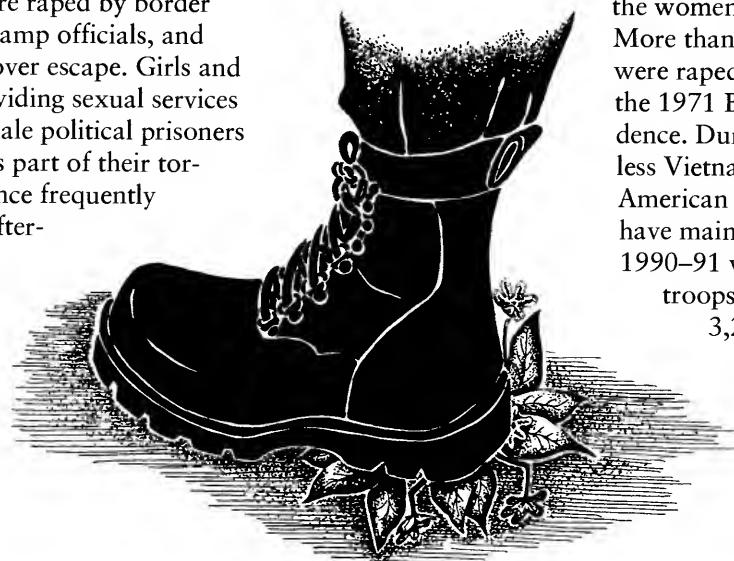
During the weeks I was preparing this issue of *Report*, the media was full of stories and analysis on the case of Bariya Ibrahim Magazu—a Nigerian teenager who became pregnant, allegedly after sexual relations with several of her father's acquaintances, and was convicted of sex outside of marriage. Under fundamentalist Islamic laws of *sharia*, Bariya was sentenced to 180 lashes, to be carried out following the birth of her baby. The sentence, reduced to 100 lashes, was carried out on January 19. None of the men she named were convicted, as the courts considered the evidence insufficient. Though reports and analyses of the situation varied, one might quickly conclude that the sex was coercive, not consensual, and that Bariya had, in fact, been raped. This story is not about “rape as a crime of war” or “wartime rape,” but it definitely is about “rape as war on women.”

Sexual assault, human rights violations, deprivation abuses, and wartime rape—all these exist on a continuum of violence that characterizes a war against women and girls in many parts of the world today. While the assignment for this issue was to write about “rape as a war crime,” it seems to leave out the many instances of rape that occur in a wide range of conflict settings. Women in flight as refugees of war are raped by border guards, sea pirates, refugee camp officials, and others who hold the power over escape. Girls and women are coerced into providing sexual services to armies on both sides. Female political prisoners frequently experience rape as part of their torture. As well, domestic violence frequently escalates during and in the aftermath of wars, since the gendered nature of militarism inevitably heightens male power and aggression, both personally and systemically. This was evident during the Gulf War and the conflict in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s.

Exposés of widespread sexual assault in the Bosnian conflict during the 1990s heightened awareness of rape as an integral part of military conflict, both as random incident and systematic strategy. It is only in the last decade that we have consciously begun to think of rape as a war crime, given the legal tribunals that began following the war in Bosnia. Yet rape as a gendered weapon of war is as old as war itself. Susan Brownmiller, in her groundbreaking study, *Men, Women, and Rape* (1975), described rape as “a common act of war” and one only needs to examine history to confirm this.

When Japanese forces captured the Chinese city of Nanking in 1937, 20,000 women were raped in the first month of occupation, hence the designation of the invasion as the Rape of Nanking. As many as a million women were raped when the Soviet army entered German occupied territory towards the end of the Second World War. During the same war, around 200,000 Korean women were raped as “comfort girls” in service to the Japanese army. Hardly explored at all is the rape of Jewish women during the Holocaust. One Holocaust educator told me that racial purity laws made it an offense for German soldiers to rape Jews but it happened nevertheless, and the women were killed afterward.

More than 200,000 Bengali women were raped by Pakistani soldiers in the 1971 Bangladesh war of independence. During the Vietnam war, countless Vietnamese women were raped by American soldiers, but these incidents have mainly been silenced. In the 1990–91 war against Kuwait, Iraqi troops reportedly raped about 3,200 women. The media coverage of this aroused western popular opinion in support of a U.S. attack on Iraq. It is estimated that 250,000 Tutsi women



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were raped in the genocidal war in Rwanda in 1994. And we have all read about the notorious “rape camps” created during the conflict in the Balkans in 1992–94, in which 20,000–50,000 women were raped.

Why is rape such a common act of war? And why does an ordinary young man turned soldier become a brutal serial rapist? In understanding rape as war crime, it is important to keep in mind that military conflict is a highly-gendered process in which exaggerated qualities of both male and female are used to mobilize nations and individuals. A young man trained to be a warrior is “hypermasculinized.” He is validated for using aggression and violence and learns to despise and feel contempt for women. Brainwashed as a killer and misogynist, he is well-disposed to become a rapist. Women are raped because they “belong” to the opponents, but they are also raped because they are women.

When rape is systematic as it was in Bosnia, it is part of a larger program of genocide whereby one group attempts to obliterate the ethnic, racial, and national identity—or complete existence—of another group. Such explanations, applied often to the rapes of Croat and Muslim women by Serbs, generally reinforce a patriarchal ethno-nationalism that assumes ethnic identity is passed on by the father. Women impregnated by rape were thus carrying “Serb” babies. Unfortunately, war crimes investigations from this particular conflict have at times regarded rape only as a crime against an ethnic group, rather than a crime against a woman as an individual as well.

Wartime rape has many consequences. It is demoralizing and humiliating for those societies and groups whose women are targeted. Indeed, this is why it is part of military strategy. In highly patriarchal societies that view women as men’s property and/or place significant value on female purity, a raped woman is frequently ostracized and considered dishonored. For this reason, many women choose not to reveal their experiences of rape. The trauma is exacerbated for women who become pregnant and must deal with giving birth to “the enemy,” though abortions also become prevalent in the aftermath of wartime rape. Aside from the physical and emotional pain that it inflicts on women, wartime rape also has a societal function, which, as Ruth Seifert explains, “regulates unequal power relationships between the sexes: it serves to maintain a cultural order between the sexes or—when this

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order becomes fragile—to restore it.”* One of the reasons why rape sometimes increases in the aftermath of militarized conflict is to restore hierarchical gender relations that may have been de-stabilized during wartime, as is often the case historically.

While I believe that writing and talking about wartime rape from a feminist perspective is important for the purposes of education and empathy, I have mixed feelings about telling women’s stories of rape. As more than one individual said to me while I researched this issue, telling the stories of rape survivors only replicates the pain and shame. This ambivalence is expressed in Amy Gopp’s poem in this issue. Some writers have observed that media obsession with the rapes in Bosnia verged on making the events pornographic. Various writers, reflecting back on the extensive media coverage of the systematic rapes of Muslim and Croat women by Serb soldiers in the early 1990s, comment on the way in which rapes—motivated by ethno-nationalism—were then used as ethno-nationalist propaganda on the part of the Croatian people. Women’s personal experiences of violence to their bodies (and souls) became less important than the victimization of a nation. And victims of wartime rape who are outside of the accepted parameters—such as Serbian women raped by Croats—are not heard, nor is the violence against them considered a war crime. It is also argued that the publicized attention to rape as ethnic cleansing in the Balkans will have the effect of further silencing wartime rapes that do not fit the categories of nationalism.

In the end, wartime rape is as much, if not more, about the war on women than it is about war between nations and states. The poetry and prose in this issue will hopefully add to your understanding and reflection on rape of women as the longest war in history.

—compiled by Marlene Epp

Marlene Epp is an assistant professor of history and peace & conflict studies at Conrad Grebel College at the University of Waterloo in Waterloo, Ontario. She teaches courses in Mennonite History and Gender in War and Peace. Her research and writing focuses on the histories of Mennonite women and immigrant women in Canada.

*Ruth Seifert, “War and Rape: A Preliminary Analysis,” in *Mass Rape: The War Against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, ed. Alexandra Stiglmayer (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 57.

**Looking for a good place
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From the editor

My closest connection to the violence of war is through my husband's nightmares. He is from the former Yugoslavia, born within a mixed marriage with a Bosnian Muslim father and Serb mother. He knows women and children, from his Bosnian side of the family, who are widowed or fatherless due to the war. He knows high school and college classmates in Serbia who never returned from the fighting. He experienced fear for his own personal safety while on a train that dipped into Bosnia during the war. He had heard the rumors that the train was sometimes forcefully boarded and Muslim men taken from it to be shot. He knew that he could be identified as such because of his father's Muslim name on his ID. Fortunately for him, the train was not boarded that day, and he did not personally experience fighting. Still these years later, I wake him from a nightmare about once a week. I have wondered how those with first-hand experience—those who spent many days fearing for their safety and have experienced bodily violation—sleep through the night.

This was a hard issue for me to read. There is much pain to be found in it, and I was not able to read it in one sitting like I have other issues. I assume it will be hard for you as well. Have we done the right thing by publishing this issue? It is difficult to be sure if it was right to ask women to relive these kinds of experiences. But it is often cathartic to tell the hard experiences of life, and it is important to know the truth of what has happened to so many women around the world in order for us to work toward stopping it from happening again. So what can we here in North America do? We can support agencies that work with women who have experienced rape or the trauma of war. We can continue to speak out against patriarchy and how, as Marlene mentioned in her introduction, a woman defined as the property of her family or community makes wartime rape a "useful" weapon against the enemy since it strikes at family honor or ethnic identity. We can remember that where there is little human hope, there is always the redeeming power of God.

—edited by Debra Gingerich

by Tatjana Alvadj

Culture and rape: Reflections on Bosnia

Despite the contemporary political views about a historic antagonism among Bosnian peoples (Muslims, Croats and Serbs), this does not explain the origins of the war that happened in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1992 and 1995. After 1878, different ethnic and religious groups lived in peace, interrupted only by two major outbursts of violence: World War I and World War II. However, the fragile and sensitive balance established among Bosnian peoples living together in recent history was destroyed in 1992, shortly after Bosnia and Herzegovina was recognized as an independent state and accepted into the United Nations.

Reducing the explanation for conflict to ethnic tensions may fit particular political agendas. Nevertheless, this does not adequately define the complexity of the Bosnian war. The purpose of the war, induced by extreme nationalist forces from neighboring republics, was to disintegrate the Bosnian state, and absorb its parts into the territories of Serbia (present Yugoslavia) and Croatia.¹ The plan was to destroy the Bosnian past (the National Library in Sarajevo, the Oriental Institute in Sarajevo, mosques all over the country, the Old Bridge in Mostar, and many other monuments disappeared in ruins), its present (ethnic cleansing), and its future (between 20,000 and 50,000 raped women, forcibly impregnated and tortured).

Brainwash

The preparations for the war started several years before the war actually began, after the change of the political elite in Serbia. By using manufactured historical facts, creating a virtual threat coming from other nations, and spreading systematic TV propaganda against neighbors of different ethnic origin, the new political establishment created an environment of suspicion, fear and anxiety across Serbia. Former co-citizens and friends (Kosovar Albanians, Slovenians, Croats and Bosnian Muslims) became demonized and were transformed into the worst

Rape legally recognized as a war crime for the first time

On February 22, 2001, three Bosnian Serbs were convicted, at the U.N. war crimes tribunal in The Hague, of crimes against humanity. This encompassed a range of crimes, including rape and sexual enslavement, after a 10-month trial that heard harrowing evidence from their Muslim victims. This clearly established rape as a war crime when used as an instrument of war and a crime against humanity when it was widespread and systematic. Secondly, it has widened the definition of slavery. Two of the defendants were each

convicted of a count of enslavement. It is the first time in history that the issue of sex slavery has been recognized as a crime against humanity. Even during the Nuremberg trials (after World War II), the issue of slavery focused only on forced labor. That definition has now been expanded to include sex abuse. It remains to be seen if warring parties will now take this seriously. But the message has now been sent that those who commit such crimes—and are proven to have done so—will face very serious charges.

enemies. Finally, the extremely volatile atmosphere exploded into a barbarous nationalism spread by numerous zealots swearing to protect their country from this manufactured enemy at any price. Croatia reacted with vehement chauvinism of its own, which spilled over the borders into Bosnia, and so the war could begin.

This direct political brainwashing prepared the nation for the war, presumably men against men. Still, it did not explicitly prepare them to rape. There is no evidence that raping women during the war in Bosnia was clearly articulated in any military plans. It happened nonetheless; and it happened with such thorough and elaborate sophistication that a previously established hidden agenda must have existed beyond explicit war strategies, despite the apparent chaos of the theater of war.

The rapes of Bosnian women (the vast majority among them Bosnian Muslims) were conducted in specially organized brothels and rape camps. The rapes often occurred in the presence of other men, sometimes the family members of the victims. Patriotic songs and vulgar words directed to the victims accompanied the acts. Raped women were bitten and starved to death. Sometimes, the rapes were even filmed and later used for propaganda.

These acts were not necessarily performed by strangers. They were men who, until a few months before, belonged to the same society, spoke the same language, shared the same values, watched the same TV shows, and cheered for the same music and soccer stars as did their victims. What makes these acts appear more brutal is that these soldiers were very often neighbors, schoolmates, colleagues, and countrymen of the victims. Therefore, the questions arise but remain unanswered. How could that possibly happen? How could the transformation from a woman next door into a faceless object of “sexualized ethnic hatred” and violent outrage occur in such a short period of time?

Background

Looking for a good place to start searching for the motives of these atrocities, one may glimpse into the cultural background of former Yugoslav society before the war, when everything seemed to be fine and peaceful. That society was patriarchal and misogynic like many others in the world.

In the Serbo-Croatian language (now existing as Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian), the word “homeland” (*domovina, otadzbina*) has female grammatical gender. It does in other languages as well, such as Latin *patria*, Polish *ojczyzna*, French *patrie*. Very often the word “homeland” was equalized with the word “mother” (motherland), as a personification of a nation’s most precious, ideal, vulnerable, and fertile being. Consequently, protecting the country means protecting our mothers (sisters, daughters) from the enemy, and invading the enemy’s country means assaulting their mothers (sisters, daughters).

The literature of former Yugoslavia was highly praised and taught in Yugoslav schools. In that literature, female characters exist either as ideal, asexual, bodiless beings (again, very often materialized in creatures of mother, sister, or daughter) or as amoral, restless, and sexually unsatisfied women who, at the end of the day, are always cruelly punished for their socially unacceptable behavior. There are many parallels of this pattern in European literature of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Comparable examples of this attitude towards women could be found in the former Yugoslav movies honored at film festivals in Cannes and Venice. If we delve deep into every day life, we can find similar but more blatant stereotypes in rock music (“stay the trash till the end” sang a rock musician about a girl friend), and especially, in very popular contemporary folk music. The lyrics of these songs are full of disloyal women who deceive decent, honest and scrupulous men. The men, drowning their despair in alcohol, cry out for their (ideal, sinless) mother (“O, mother, mother, why did you give me a birth when I am so unhappy . . .”) and promise vengeance on



It is important to understand that such a massive and deliberate campaign of violence against women does not happen from nothing.

happened in the circles of professional female politicians in former Yugoslavia during the war. They voluntarily accepted enforced stereotypes, recognizing the victims only on their own side. Women across former Yugoslavia paid the price of belonging to a society which not only victimized them but also used that victimization against them. The rapes committed during the Bosnian conflict, rather than uniting women against violence to women, were used to a large extent as tools of ethno-nationalism created by patriarchal cultures on both sides.

The reasons for the rapes that occurred in Bosnia in the early 1990s are many and varied. It is important to understand that such a massive and deliberate campaign of violence against women does not happen from nothing.

Rather, a pre-war culture full of symbolic images of hatred towards women created a climate in which wartime rape of women could happen in the way that it did.

Notes

1. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia were all republics of former Yugoslavia, and in the early 1990s transformed into independent countries.

2. The few feminist groups that survived continued to send messages about the torture of women across the borders, paying a very high price in their own countries.

3. Biljana Plavsic, probably the most famous woman in politics, was one of the leaders of Bosnian Serbs actively promoting ethnic cleansing. In January 2001, she turned herself into the international tribunal on war crimes at The Hague.

Tatjana Alvadj was born in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. She worked there as an art critic and art gallery curator. In 1996 she immigrated to Canada. She presently works as Project Coordinator for the Edmonton Centre for Newcomers in Edmonton, Alberta.

the unfaithful girl. When Borislav Herak, a Serbian soldier who raped and killed three Muslim girls, was asked by the *Dallas Morning News* what he and his fellow soldiers did after committing these horrible deeds, he said that they went back to the car and turned on "Serbian folk music. The usual folk music." That music—pathetic, vulgar, and straight misogynic—gave them comfort and justification for their deeds, and thereby washed the blood from their hands: "the girls deserved it!"

Women's answer

In the early nineties, when the war trumpets sounded loud all over former Yugoslavia, some women on each side of the conflict, concerned for their sons and husbands, organized themselves into groups. They called themselves by names such as "Mothers" or "The Wall of Love." Originally, they were against the war and fighting, trying to reach out to each other regardless of their political or ethnic differences. Unfortunately, the political elites quickly manipulated them, turning them against one another, using them for their own political agenda, and finally silencing and marginalizing them.²

Ironically, some women on each side of the conflict were involved in politics as parliament members or in high positions of government.³ However, the solidarity of women with women, regardless of their ethnic belonging, never

Rape of the Good-Hearted

It's not enough that my country has been at war
my people wounded, cleansed, and killed
and that my government is corrupt and self-centered;
It's not even enough that my children
have grown up not knowing security
or that I have suffered unnecessarily and incessantly
For you had to come on your Noble Crusades
and Rape me once more
after I barely had a chance to crawl back
on my knees again
Legs still spread eagle
my body crying
STANITE! NE MOGU VISE!
but of course you didn't understand my alien words
nor did you care to listen to them
yet again my unassuming bare body
cried stop
but you are deaf
and blind
unwilling to help me
Heal
in ways that I know are right for me
instead, raping me again
ruthless and rude
denying me my real name
intruding my privacy
mocking my pride
stripping my dignity

All in the name of your imposing
Human Rights
for, in pursuit of your idea of my human rights
you've taken away my personal rights
Ja
“a poor, primitive, Croatian woman”
trapped underneath a Western Omniscient
with your monthly reports and international
board meetings
you're supposed to save me and my people
from ourselves
or so you'd like to believe
before the “Balkans” destroy us all—again
But you've failed miserably.
I convict you of Rape of the Worst Kind:
Rape without Realization
for you did your job and then just walked away—
still innocent and well-intentioned,
your altruistic, heroic reputation intact
and information in hand
you're saving the world . . .
one rape at a time.
For you'll commit this addictive crime
again and again
Thanks to your grand ideals and your good heart.

—Amy Gopp

Amy Gopp was raised in Kent, Ohio. She became assistant director of the Lion and the Lamb Peace Arts Center at Bluffton College, Bluffton, Ohio, where she was introduced to the Mennonite community and to the work of Mennonite Central Committee.

The summer of 1995, Amy embarked on a journey of service to the former Yugoslavia, volunteering with MCC. For four years, she worked as a peace activist in Croatia and Bosnia in the areas of refugee concerns, interfaith dialogue and ecumenism, conflict resolution, and reconciliation. She received her MA in Conflict Resolution from Antioch University in 1998. She now resides in Washington, DC where she works as a graduate academic advisor at American University.

Amy wrote this poem after talking to a Croatian friend who had been hounded by American journalists wanting the “rape stories” from the former Yugoslavia. What they didn't understand, though, was how they were raping the women all over again with all of their insensitive, inappropriate questions.



by Marlene Epp

Mennonite women and rape during the Second World War

Stories of wartime rape in the histories of Mennonites are rare. The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren describes numerous incidents of rape when 17th century Hutterite communities in Moravia were subject to persecution and attack by hostile forces. It is more than likely that 16th century Anabaptist women, arrested as heretics, experienced rape as part of their torture while in prison. Mennonite women who have lived under brutal dictatorships, such as in El Salvador, or who have fled violent conflicts in their country of birth, such as in Laos, likely include the threat and experience of rape in their stories as well.

Tumultuous events that almost decimated the Mennonite settlements in Russia after the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 included many instances of rape, as Mennonites became the targets of anarchist and Red Army attacks during the chaos and civil war that followed the revolution. Personal and general histories of that period are full of the “rape, pillage and plunder” motif but don’t analyse the gendered nature of the violence that only women experienced.

Soviet Mennonites who lived through the Stalin era and then fled Ukraine during the Second World War became part of one of the most extensive phases of wartime rape in the 20th century. This article will focus on the rape of German women by the Red Army during World War II.

Most Soviet Mennonites lived in the part of Ukraine which was under German occupation from August 1941 until September 1943. By the time the German army arrived, the Mennonite population in Ukraine had been altered dramatically due to the forced deportation by Communist authorities of thousands of German speaking colonists to labor camps in the east and north of the country. The perception of Stalin’s government that the Mennonites (along with other religious and cultural minorities) were untrustworthy and a potential threat to the state led to the arrest and disappearance of much

of the adult male population throughout the 1930s, climaxing in the purges of 1937–38. This, followed by the evacuation eastward of additional youth and men and later entire villages in the summer of 1941, left an unusually unbalanced ratio of women to men. In most Mennonite villages, about 50 percent of households were without a father.

In some villages, there was only a handful of men between the ages of 16 and 60. There was an overwhelming sense that all the men were gone.

Approximately 35,000 Mennonites—mostly women and children—left their homes in Ukraine in the fall of 1943 and traveled west with the retreating German forces. During the last two years of the war, Soviet Mennonites were scattered across Germany and its occupied territories. By war’s end, the refugee population included eastern European Mennonites displaced from their historic homes in Poland, Prussia, and the Free City of Danzig. Mennonites became part of a mass of humanity displaced from their homes during the war.

In the fall and winter of 1944–45, the resident and refugee population in central and eastern Europe experienced the full impact of the rapid Soviet advance westward as the tide of war turned against Germany. The Soviet takeover eventually resulted in the displacement of 15 million Germans from their homes. Accompanying the Soviet victories was a violent rampage against civilians, including widespread rape of German women by Red Army soldiers. Although much of the savagery can be attributed to spontaneous retribution for German atrocities, there is also evidence of systematic incitement of Soviet soldiers to rape women as they occupied territory. Estimates of the number of rapes that occurred during the Soviet assault vary considerably. Some sources state that 20,000 to half a million women were raped, while other statistics refer to two million cases of rape, since many women were raped more than once.

The fact that numerous Mennonite women refugees were in territories overtaken by Soviet forces immediately presents the probability that they were also victims of rape. Despite their pre-war Soviet citizenship, which they, in any case, tried to conceal for fear of being sent back, Mennonite women were not differentiated from other Germans as possible targets. In Mennonite refugee com-

Soviet Mennonites who lived through the Stalin era and then fled Ukraine during the Second World War became part of one of the most extensive phases of wartime rape in the 20th century.

munities, with very few adult men, women were forced by circumstance to step out of traditional gender roles. Yet the fear and reality of rape reinforced a gender hierarchy in which women were vulnerable in the face of male violence and also dependent on male protection.

The incidence of rape has received little attention from chroniclers of the Mennonite story during World War II. In part, this is because women's experiences have not been central in published narratives but also because of the sensitive and private nature of rape itself. One Mennonite historian, in describing the Soviet advance into Germany, summarizes the matter in two sentences: "Women and even children had been raped (hundreds, perhaps even thousands; we do not know; it is a subject too painful to talk about). Men and children were forced to watch as their mothers and sisters were abused. . . . It was a miracle if a woman that fell into the hands of Soviet soldiers was not raped."

One Prussian Mennonite woman, in her late teens or early twenties at the time, recalled the Soviet occupation of her homeland towards the end of the war:

The Russian soldiers came into the house and took everything they wanted. Very little was left us and they came quite often. All the men between 16 and 60 years of age and women without children were taken away and not seen again. It was said most of them died in prison camps. Women and young girls were raped. This happened daily until the end of the war. Everything went without plan. One day they took this person, the next day the other.

In memoirs and oral interviews with Mennonite refugee women, the subject is often dealt with abstractly and evasively. And while other aspects of their life stories are told in great detail, wartime rape is dealt with in general terms, or passed over quickly as too horrible to talk about. For instance, one witness to a brutal rape, says of the Soviet soldiers, "They were terrible, just like animals. You can't explain." And in a 1949 letter to a friend, a postwar Canadian immigrant woman wrote: "We . . . reached Brandenburg before the Russians overtook us. How they tormented us! Words cannot describe how horrible that was."

In her moving account written shortly after the war, Johanna Dueck describes in detail the rape and murder of Helene Hamm, the supervisor of a home for the elderly

in West Prussia. Johanna mentions that she also responded to the familiar demand of the Soviet soldiers—"Woman, come here!"—but in her narrative focuses on the story of Helene, who she obviously held in high esteem. Though Dueck's own experience was equally traumatic, she is later full of reproach for herself and cites her lack of courage in taking actions which she feels could have prevented the shooting of Helene. Dueck concludes her account by saying: "The martyrdom of sister Helene Hamm stands for all Mennonite women." In keeping with the well-worn Mennonite martyr archetype, Helene Hamm had to die in order to attain the status of a martyr. Those women who were raped, and experienced a certain death inside themselves, carried with them shame and humiliation and were not viewed as heroines.

Like other German women, Mennonites also confronted decisions about suicide and abortion in the aftermath of rape, but like the assault itself, these morally problematic issues are rarely discussed. One woman recalled accompanying her friends to transport their sick mother home in a wagon. At the time, the children only realized that their mother was seriously ill. In recalling the situation years later, the woman acknowledged that "Auntie K. had an abortion from a back alley butcher [and] just about bled to death." Recalling an attack on her village, another woman said she hid under coal while her mother was raped. Afterwards, she said, "Women and girls ran into the lake, drowning themselves. Bodies were just coming to the shore. I saw all that."

Sexual assault did not always mean a sudden violent attack by a nameless soldier or group of soldiers. Some women, after experiencing successive rapes, or threats of rape, sought out a protector usually in the form of a Soviet officer. In that way, they could escape ongoing brutal attacks from numerous soldiers. Similar scenarios saw a woman submit to sexual acts in order to avoid other forms of violence against herself and her children or to obtain assistance in crossing tightly-guarded borders. Such alliances occurred for Mennonite refugee women as well. One woman who found herself doing housework for Soviet officers in the Russian zone following the war said, "it was better . . . if you had a friend, then the others would leave you alone." As time progressed, her motivation for submitting to the sexual demands of an officer became the desperate need to feed her three young children as food was increasingly scarce.

Individual experiences of rape may also have been placed within a general framework of problematic morality—as opposed to personal tragedy—that clouded the wartime legacy of Mennonite refugees.

In later years she categorized her actions as sin, yet felt justified in her choices because of her maternal responsibility. In such cases, the term rape has many meanings along a continuum of sexual relations which were at times coercive, at times mutual, and always resulting from the limited and difficult choices that women had during war.

The impact that this history of rape might have had on Mennonite families and communities has hardly been examined. In Canada, where many of the refugees found new homes, the presence of rape survivors was acknowledged but rarely dealt with in a therapeutic manner. It was the more generalized fear of postwar repatriation to the Soviet Union, experienced by both men and women, that became the defining horror in the encounter with the Red Army in the Soviet zone. Stories of being “sent back” became part of the public narrative while rape did not.

Individual experiences of rape may also have been placed within a general framework of problematic morality—as opposed to personal tragedy—that clouded the wartime legacy of Mennonite refugees. Wartime acts of bribery, lying, stealing, and military service on the part of Mennonite men, created the perception that refugee immigrants were morally fallen and in need of rehabilitation. The presence of unmarried mothers with so-called illegitimate children contributed to concerns about immorality, even if the circumstances of conception were unknown. Partly due to social norms of the era, wartime rape may have been subsumed within these concerns about sexual morality and not understood as an issue of violence against women.

One also wonders whether the experience of wartime rape reinforced gendered characteristics of acquiescence, obedience and submission by women: traits which were already idealized in pacifist Mennonite teachings. The statement by a rape counsellor that “rape’s authority to alter women’s lives lies in rape’s reminder to women that they are expected to obey men’s commands without any question or challenges to this authority” suggests that this might in fact be true. Certainly the experience of wartime rape had an enormous impact on the later lives of survivors, their families, and their communities.

This article is drawn from Marlene Epp’s book, *Women without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War*, University of Toronto Press, 2000.

by Nina*

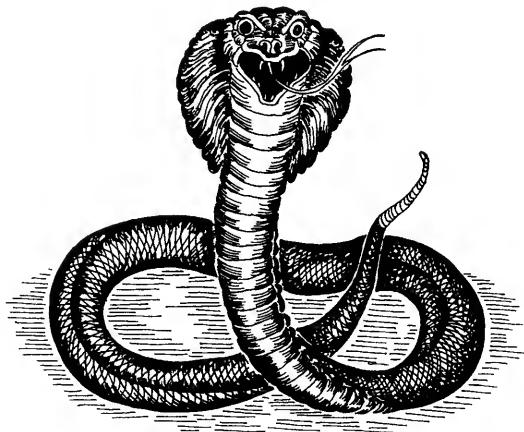
Mirthless Joyride

The rifle butt impacting on my temple was explosive. Brilliant hues danced before my eyes in great kaleidoscopic magic.

Am yanked up to the ripping of fabric to wakefulness of my nakedness. Shocked into stupor in a drunken haze of my unsupporting jelly legs. Thrown onto a cot, slammed against the wall as the weight on me clouded me in an alcoholic bear hug. My arms are being pulled into a painful breaking point. My legs are pinned and weighed down. The raucous voices wash over me in tidal bites of a cobra.

In my numbness, I feel a tear so sharp and searingly painful, I yelled to meet uproarious hoots of laughter and merriment. The cobra bites have set me on a fire of revulsion as it moves in me, demanding all my secrets, joys, laughter, my soul, my very being and my sanity as I surrendered to the beckoning oblivion, gagging.

The icy cold water hit me to the realization of hoards of militia in all stages of undress, queuing up for their meal—me.



Reprinted from and used with permission of VAST Quarterly, the publication of the Vancouver Association for Survivors of Torture.

*Her name has been changed.

Though the war is over, in the last three years Zimbabwe has experienced a high rise in criminal cases of rape and incest.

as told to Doris Dube

The story of Tendai

Doris Dube: Zimbabwe went through a war which left many scarred for life. Some people had to deal with unplanned-for babies while others dealt with diseases. Though the war is over, in the last three years Zimbabwe has experienced a high rise in criminal cases of rape and incest.

On July 19, 2000 a story on the front page of our local paper, *The Chronicle*, sent hair-raising shock waves in the whole community of Bulawayo. A 14-year-old girl had been gang raped by five men. Soon after that, we read about two girls who had been raped by their father and brother. In another equally shocking incident, *The Observer* carried the headline, "Father impregnates his four daughters." These bizarre cases are not isolated situations but only a few of the many we hear and read about in the ever increasing crime against defenseless women and girls.

Many people have tried to figure out why men commit such crimes against humanity. Research has shown that the use of aphrodisiacs is a contributory factor to some of these crimes. Another cause is superstition. Some N'angas tell their clients that having intercourse with one's daughter or raping a young girl cures an otherwise incurable disease.

When rape occurs the victim suffers more than can ever be told. Long after the rapist has served his jail term for the crime—if he is convicted—the victim is still suffering mentally and sometimes physically. Many have fatherless babies. Others contract sexually transmitted diseases. In this day of the killer AIDS, some are condemned to death by this senseless act. Many of the stories are never told. Find here the story of Tendai. She is now an adult but still bears the scars of the past.

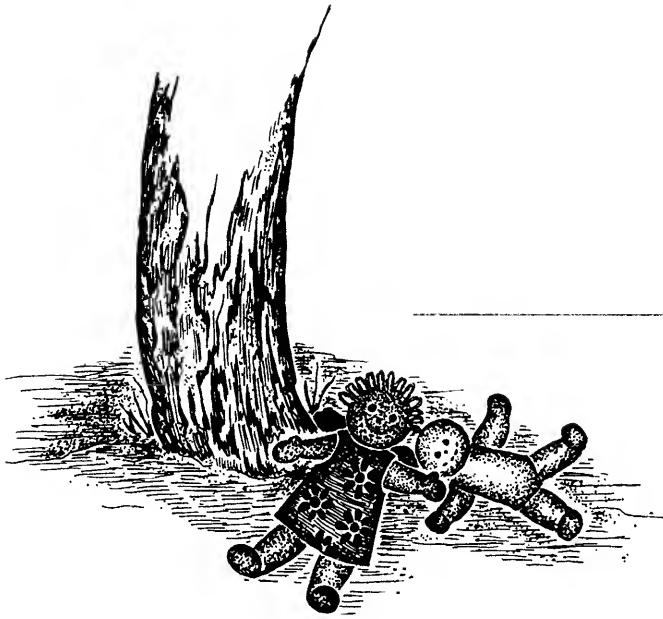
Tendai*: For years I have fought a losing battle against the memory of the events of that day. As if it was yesterday, I am often able to replay all that happened even to the extent of hearing the birds singing. I can smell the foul body sweat. My breathing becomes labored as if his big dirty hand is still over my mouth. When I was younger, some of it was very confusing because, though I knew that something was wrong, I was never sure just what it was. Now I am older and wiser. I know I am scared. I want to run away and never stop. My fear is even made worse by the burden of having to live with this secret. I am able to share it with strangers but never with family. I have been encouraged to open up but I am scared. My aunt swore me to secrecy. Now she is gone. Dare I speak up or should I be forever loyal to her decree?

It happened when I was about eight years old. We had a school break in April, and I was longing to visit with Granny. She had not been to our house for quite some time. Mother said she would be a long time in visiting because there was too much work for her to do in the village. She was harvesting a huge maize crop. The process of gathering the crop, threshing and bringing it into the granaries would take up all her time and energy so she definitely would not be coming into the city where we lived. An uncle who lived with us while attending school was going to the village. I asked my parents if I could go along with him, and they agreed.

When we arrived at the village, Grandmother danced for joy. She gave me a big kiss on the back of my hand. When I handed her my school report, she dragged me along in a wild dance then instructed my auntie, who also lived in the village, to slaughter a chicken for me. That evening we had a great feast. Uncle and I had to answer many questions about our family in the city. The next day when everyone went to the fields, I went along. Harvesting maize was no easy job. It made my whole body itchy. As the sun went up, there was the additional challenge of swatting small flies which buzzed around my ears. The day was very hot.

In the days that followed I did not have to go to the fields with everyone. I was allowed to stay at home and play on my own as there were no other children of my age in the village. Grandmother said there was no need for me to

*Her name has been changed.



**My fear is even made worse
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go so I stayed. We had been at the village for just over a week. I was playing with my rag dolls under the guava tree when an older uncle who also lived in the village came back. He was always a strange one. Everyone said he was mad and so we did not mind him much. Sometimes he talked alone. I heard him talking even as he was going into his hut. Soon he called me into the hut.

When I went into the hut, it looked like there was no one inside. As I turned around to go out, the door slammed behind me. In the half light, I saw him. He really was mad. Before I could say anything, he lunged at me and threw me onto the floor. He started fumbling with my clothes and pulled off my panties. All the time he was talking to himself though I could not tell what he was saying. I screamed once then his hand clamped over my mouth. I bit it, but he pressed it harder onto my mouth. I tried to push him off, but he was too heavy. He was way too heavy for me. Then came the pain. I thought I was dying. I don't know which was more terrible, the sounds he made or the pain of being crushed by his frenzied body.

As if from far away, I heard my auntie's voice. We must have heard it at the same time because suddenly my uncle moved off me. Before he could stand up or cover himself, the door was thrown open. I cried then. I cried as my auntie pulled me up and covered me up. When my uncle was about to push out of the door, my auntie went for him. She beat him with her hands then picked up a stick which was near the door and just kept on beating him. All this time she was scolding him and calling him all sorts of names I had never heard before. My uncle never even ran away. My aunt beat him until her energy was spent then she gathered me in her arms, and we cried together.

She warmed up some water and gave me a bath. She comforted me. I was feeling very sore but she said I was not supposed to tell. She said I was not to tell Grandmother. I was not to tell Mother. I was not to tell a living soul. I never told until I was 15 years old. After that day, I never remained alone in the village. Sometimes Grandmother said I should stay behind and play but my auntie always answered for me. She said I could play as well in the fields as I could at the village.

When I went back to the city, I carried my deep secret with me. I carried it with me to school and to play. I never forgot. I pushed it to the back of my mind. When I was in high school, my friends started talking about boyfriends. We talked about what happened between men and women because we learned about it in biology. It was scary. Like everyone else, my body started changing. I started sleeping badly. Many times my mother woke me up in the night when I had nightmares and started crying. Though my friends loved this subject, I was scared of both boys and men.

I shared my secret with a Christian teacher. She prayed with me but my fears never left me. Over the years, I have gone for counseling but I can't shake off the fear. My auntie died in 1994. I am now 23 years old. I have tried to build relationships with boys, but they don't survive because I am afraid. I hate to be in an enclosed space with a person of the opposite sex. Even at my workplace, I struggle with this. I don't think I will ever marry.

Doris Dube and her husband Jethro are co-country representatives for MCC in Zimbabwe. A writer and former teacher, she also serves as Africa Editor for Mennonite World Conference. She has published children's books in both English and Sindebele, her local language, and has contributed articles to books and magazines. In 1993 she published a collection of women's stories featuring Zimbabwean and Zambian women. She is mother to three boys and twin girls, ranging in age from 11 to 20 years.

Women in Kosova showed that they were capable of caring for themselves and their families and even their husbands. Their role as decision-makers was accomplished successfully.

by Sevdie Ahmeti

Violence against women in Kosovo

During the conflict in Kosova (also known as Kosovo) in 1998, women and children were more at risk than anybody else. As a result of war, there was a massive movement of the population from one village to the other, from one mountain to the other. The only aim of those in flight was to survive. According to data gathered in August 1998, more than 600,000 persons were either displaced persons or refugees. Among the displaced people living under rough conditions, 63% were children, 0 to 18 years old, and 25% were women. Therefore, an estimated 88% of the displaced persons were women and children living in the open and at risk.

Women in conflict situations are subject to fear, intimidation, hunger, sacrifice, killings, rape and ethnic cleansing. At the same time, apart from their lives being at risk, the role of women in conflict changes completely when they become ultimate family heads. It is no longer necessary for them to request or get male permission for any kind of decision regarding family care, shelter, protection, organizing food, travel inside and outside the region in conflict, performing administrative works, doing marketing, etc. Women in Kosova showed that they were capable of caring for themselves and their families and even their husbands. Their role as decision-makers was accomplished successfully.

Pre-war violence against women

Albanian women in the former Yugoslavia were targeted a long time before the armed conflict began. Horrible propaganda against Albanian women started during the 1980s, presenting these women as slaves of their families and prejudicing them in all aspects. The aim was to create an opinion of hatred by blaming Albanian women for the high birth rate.

In 1990, gynecological clinics and centers in Kosova were closed to Albanian women and girls, thus worsening their position and well-being. Dismissed for political reasons from their jobs, women and children came to represent the poorest part of the population.

As well, during the past ten years in Kosovo, domestic violence increased to extremely high levels. The escalation of violence was related to the political situation. In 1996, a survey of 1000 women showed that less than 3% were employed. Roughly 68% of those interviewed declared that they had suffered from domestic violence. When questioned regarding who used violence against them, 70% were fathers, husbands, brothers, mothers, in-laws, etc. Whereas 30% of the perpetrators of violence were the Serbian police, who would enter houses of Albanians during the late hours of the night or early hours of the morning when witnesses would not be present.

The low rate of employment and high rate of violence were important indicators that war was about to start. This detailed project of hatred towards creating a culture of war ended up with the rape of thousands of women and girls starting before the war and continuing in massive degree during the war.

Rape as a weapon of war and genocidal action against women

Albanian society in Kosova is traditional. Men are brought up and educated as breadwinners and protectors of the family. To touch a woman means to touch the honor of the family and directly provoke the man to react. The Serbs knew this well. The other reason why the Serb forces used rape as a weapon of war on a large scale was that the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLO) would evacuate the population in danger prior to engaging in confrontation. Serb forces knew this well. They not only used rape as a weapon of war but afterwards burned the tracks of crime by totally destroying the evidence through a scorched earth operation.

To show that rape was well programmed and that the rapists knew the victims, I will mention one of the tragic cases in Qirez village. In April 1999, Serb forces ordered a group of 27 people to depart from the village of Kozhice (10 km north of Qirez) in the direction of Glogovc town. The group, composed of women and children and one old



man, were forced to walk on foot at gunpoint. At the crossroad of Qirez, Serb forces ordered the group back to Kozhice. They forced the group to stay in an uncompleted house and kept them for two days and two nights without providing basic needs and food. After two days, Serb forces again ordered the group to set off for Glllogovc. Walking along the road in the cold weather of April, the group was reportedly shot either over their heads or at their feet. Suddenly the group was stopped in Qirez. It was at this place where camouflaged Serb forces, some with bandanas, selected ten women and girls and raped them one by one, each for half an hour. After the first serial rape, Serb forces took the ten women by force with them. One of the survivors was a pregnant woman, in her seventh month. When the war ended, eight women were found drowned in three water wells. One victim, a young woman, was thrown in alone. A mother and her three daughters were found in the second water well. In the third well were three women between 50 and 60 years old.

The massive extent of gang rape can also be illustrated with another case in western Kosova. All of the houses in a village were burnt to ashes long before the air strikes. People fled for their lives, however five families remained inside the village. Out of these five families, again ten women and girls were raped. The difference between the first case and this one is that women were raped in front of family members—fathers, husbands and children. The rapists held the family members at gun point to witness the rape of their loved ones.

The objective of Serb policy was to degrade the entire Albanian family. In central Kosova, Serb forces broke into a house where they found three family members—mother, daughter, and son. After searching and terrorizing the

Albanian society in Kosova is traditional. Men are brought up and educated as breadwinners and protectors of the family. To touch a woman means to touch the honor of the family and directly provoke the man to react.

family, they made the almost-sixteen-year-old boy rape his sister, then his mother. After this unprecedented crime, they left. Serb forces left the family alive; they had no need to spend bullets on them.

Serb police, army, and paramilitaries raped Albanian women all over Kosova. Rape attacks took different shapes and occurred under different circumstances. Both survivors and witnesses state that rape took place in their homes, during the massive deportation, and during times of capture. Women were raped in their gardens, in rooms, and in front of their family members. Rape occurred during the deportation while women and their families were attempting to cross borders and flee for their lives. Serb forces would try to rob families, and whether a family had money or not, women and girls would be taken and held in captivity. Some would be raped in the meantime. There are cases when rape happened in front of the deportees. The great majority of rape cases took place during the forced deportation of women and children to school premises where they were counted as hostage groups.

The great majority of the rapists cannot be identified by the survivors because they were either wearing bandanas or they were unknown to the victims. Survivors describe the perpetrators as gangs wearing camouflaged clothes in different colors as well as white and black plain uniforms. Many of the perpetrators wore scarves. Victims of rape were threatened with revenge if they spoke of their misfortune.

It is horrifying to hear the stories of some of the survivors. The great majority of them never talk, yet bare the shame for the rest of their lives. Traces and marks of violence have been noticed on some of the victims—bites, torn lips, contusions all over the body, especially in intimate parts of the victim's body.

The position of women in Kosova has not improved since the war. It is true that there is more security, but we still do not know who is wandering throughout Kosova. So the violence against women continues.

Sevdie Ahmeti is director of the Center for the Protection of Women and Children in Kosova.

My purpose in this paper is not only to discuss rape as a political weapon, but also to discuss the patterns of resistance and resilience that women have used not only to survive but also to get on with their lives.

by Mirna E. Carranza

Secrets of war

Chaos is part of people's everyday life in war-torn countries. People learn to live among gun shots; the bombing of a car, house or building; and finding corpses on their way to work or back. They also learn to live with the suffering of having a family member "disappear," in prison, or far away in a foreign country. In these contexts the lives of women, children, and the poor have little value. They are dispensable. We watch on TV or read in the newspaper about genocide that takes place around the world in the name of the "cause." The cause of a few powerful people is moved forward at the expense of the weak and vulnerable.

It is only recently that we have begun to acknowledge the use of rape as a political weapon. The rape and torture of women is done in the name of the "cause." We still know very little about the suffering of these women and the process of their recovery; that is, if they ever do recover. My purpose in this paper is not only to discuss rape as a political weapon but also to discuss the patterns of resistance and resilience that women have used, not only to survive but also to get on with their lives. I tell the story of a remarkable woman whom I had the privilege to work with in my clinical practice. Thus, I write from the perspective of a therapist and as a woman who immigrated to Canada from a war-torn country in Central America.

Much of the immigration of Salvadoreans and Guatemalans living in Toronto and Waterloo, Ontario has involved lengthy separations from family members. It has sometimes involved spending time in a transit country such as Mexico or the United States. On their journey, the immigrants and refugees have used familial and individual strategies to assist them with their emotional and economic survival.

Martha came to Canada as a refugee claimant. She arrived at the Canadian border with her husband, her twin daughters (10 years old), her youngest son (5 years

old), and two bags of luggage. She also brought with her great courage for survival and hope to find the tranquility and peace that she longed for.

Martha was born and raised in El Salvador. She was the oldest of three siblings. Her mother and father worked in a tobacco field. They spent most of their days working. In their limited free time, they talked to the children about staying in school so they could be "somebody" (a person with higher education). Martha was a very bright child. After finishing elementary school, she won a scholarship to continue to study in a private school in the city of San Salvador. This was a big success for the entire family. They made tamales to celebrate the special occasion.

Martha went to the city and made her parents and family proud. She was an excellent student. Her father and younger siblings had to take part-time jobs to help with Martha's living expenses. Martha graduated at the top of her class. Her family encouraged her to pursue post-secondary education. She was the first of many generations to graduate from high school.

Martha enrolled in the sociology department at University. There, she learned about the "unspoken" injustices of her country. She learned about the economic monopoly that existed in her country and the ideology behind it. The rich became richer by exploiting poor people who worked for a meager salary. She learned about the economic reality of her family. She had always believed that it was natural that some people were born rich while others were born poor. Her views shifted. In her third year of university, Martha joined an activist group to protest the oppression of the poor, her people. She said:

At that moment, it felt like the only thing to do. I wanted to show my parents that their efforts to educate me were paying off. I understood the injustice and the exploitation of their labor. Everyone else was doing it (joining a leftist political group). We painted some walls and spread out some "propaganda."

One night she and her friends were coming back from the library. Five armed and masked men approached them and, in a split second, pushed them into a van at gunpoint. They were blindfolded as the van drove off. They



were taken to a dark and humid place. Martha was stripped of her clothes. She found herself frightened and alone. She was beaten and interrogated for long hours. She was raped and beaten at least five times a day. Her breasts were burned with cigarettes. Martha was left to urinate and defecate in her prison room. Her wounds became infected. Martha recalls:

[The perpetrators] were listening to an English tape while they were interrogating me. They laughed and, at times, they would say "answer in English you b. . . . , I need to practice my English."

This lasted for several days and nights. Then she was blindfolded and taken in the middle of the night. They drove for several hours. Martha recalls her fear while in the car. She thought she was going to be one more person who disappeared during the civil war. She thought about her family, the tobacco field where she used to play and, in later years, work. Moreover, she thought about her parents and siblings. She thought about her boyfriend. She felt sad, not because she was about to die, but for letting down her family. She was going to be the first one in the family to graduate from a university. She thought about her dreams of helping her people. For some reason that Martha still cannot comprehend, she was dumped alive and nude in a garbage container. Some children playing and searching for food found her the next morning.

Martha does not remember anything else until she woke up in the basement of a church with her mother seated next to her bed. She was told later that she had slept for days. Martha was taken to Mexico with the assistance of some family friends. Martha did not discuss what had led her to flee. The friends living in Mexico assumed the reason behind Martha's flight was that she was a university student. A confrontation might have taken place at the university between students and the armed forces. During this time, being young and a student was considered a crime by the right wing party. Martha went along with her friends' assumptions and never spoke about what had happened to her.

Martha's boyfriend joined her a couple of weeks later. He took care of her and comforted her. They did not discuss what had taken place during Martha's disappearance. Martha decided that she was not going to torture her boyfriend with details. They swore never to talk about the traumatic event ever again and to put it behind them. Martha's strategy was *no pensar* (not to think). This helped her for some time until she realized that she had been impregnated by her captors. Although Martha and her boyfriend knew that nothing sexual had happened between them and he believed that Martha was a virgin, he took full responsibility of the pregnancy. They married and later immigrated to Los Angeles. Martha gave birth to twin daughters. Martha and her husband were very happy first time parents. Roberto, Martha's husband, became a construction worker. Martha provided home day care. This allowed her to care for her daughters and contribute to the household income.

Martha overcame her "survivor's guilt." Life was good. Martha had developed her own strategies to deal with Post Traumatic Stress (P.T.S.). They remained isolated from the rest of the El Salvadorean community, living in Los Angeles due to Martha's fears and mistrust.

The new immigration laws (1985–1990) in the United States posed a threat to the family tranquillity and sanctuary. The threats of deportation sent Martha into shock all over again. When they learned that Canada was accepting Central American immigrants and refugees, Martha and her family fled again in a matter of 24 hours. They arrived at the Canadian border filled with fears of the unknown. Roberto claimed persecution in El Salvador. He had no proof. Their case was very weak and shaky. They entered the country as refugee claimants. Martha fell into an emotional crisis. She was experiencing delayed Post Traumatic Stress. Her symptoms were very acute.

A friend suggested counseling to help her with her "stress." Martha was confronting her past trauma all over again. She was at risk of being deported. Yet, she knew she could not go back. She also did not want to tell her secret, especially to strangers. She thought it would devastate her husband and family. Nobody

Martha was a very strong and courageous woman, but her strength was getting weaker. She needed to reclaim it to continue her life journey of survival.

knew the dark secret of the twins' conception. Martha was facing a great dilemma. Martha was trying to protect her family from the painful truth. She was also trying to protect them from being deported.

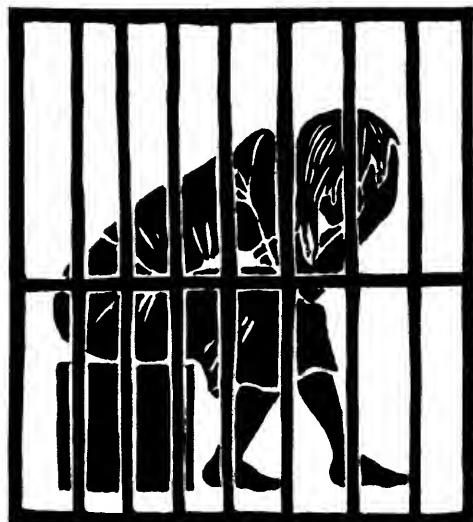
Martha was a very strong and courageous woman, but her strength was getting weaker. She needed to reclaim it to continue her life-journey of survival. She wanted to accomplish her life goals—to obtain an education, to live in the country near a lake. With the use of Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (E.M.D.R.), a special therapy technique, Martha was able to process the traumatic memories and the feelings and emotions that accompanied them. To face these memories again was not easy. Martha needed to increase her self-care and to nurture herself as much as possible. We both knew this was going to be a challenge for her, given women's multiple roles and responsibilities. Martha came up with some strategies that allowed us to proceed with the use of E.M.D.R.

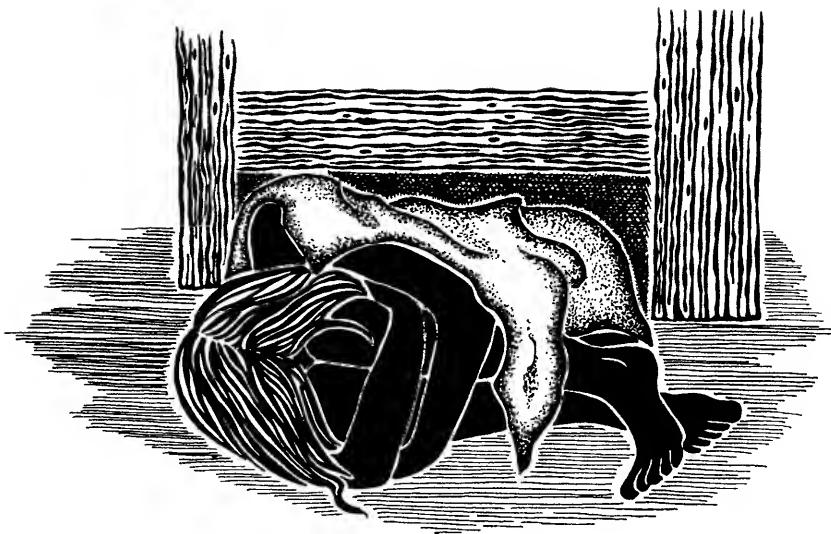
Meanwhile, her husband received a deportation letter. This did not help matters. However, Martha's resilience was remarkable. She did not only overcome the acute symptoms of P.T.S., she decided that she was going to fight for her family. She decided to inform Canadian Immigration of the rape and torture that she had experienced by the men who had supported the El Salvadorean government. Her strategy was to have an individual audience with the immigration officers. Martha was determined to stop the deportation and to prevent the actions of the perpetrators from "ruling" her life through fear and shame.

A couple of months after the hearing, Martha and her family received a letter stating that they had been granted refugee status. Martha's success was the family's success. Years later, Martha has started part-time studies at a near-by university. She continues to dream about moving to the countryside near a lake. Knowing Martha, I am certain that she will accomplish this dream and anything that she puts her mind to.

I am very thankful to Martha for allowing me to play a small role in her life. Martha's story is a story of struggle, survival, great courage, and resilience. It also highlights women's resistance and love for their family. I learned a lot from Martha. I learned about women's endurance and humility. In addition, I learned about my own privilege in working as a therapist. Her story gave me hope to continue doing what I love most. It has also made me wonder about how many Marthas there are in the world. I asked myself, how could I take a more active role as a social change agent? I began to use my voice in a new way and to think more clearly about my actions. Let me ask you: What are you doing to promote social change? How do you use your privilege? In what way might you take a step toward ensuring that others like Martha receive the help they deserve?

Mirna Carranza works as a therapeutic counselor at K-W Counseling Inc. She is a Clinical Member of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. She is also a certified E.M.D.R. practitioner. In recent years, she has worked with immigrants from many countries, providing individual, couple and family therapy as well as facilitating psycho-educational groups in the community.





Book reviews

War's Offensive on Women

War's Offensive on Women: The Humanitarian Challenge in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan by Julie A. Mertus, Humanitarianism and War Project. Bloomfield, Connecticut: Kumarian Press, 2000.

Reviewed by Judy Zimmerman Herr

The “Humanitarianism and War Project” began in the early 1990s as a cooperative effort of a number of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) which are involved in humanitarian responses to refugees and disasters. These agencies, including MCC, saw the need to look specifically at how they respond in cases of war. The project has done helpful analysis on a variety of conflicts and the humanitarian response to them, and has helped humanitarian agencies formulate guidelines for working in situations of armed conflict.

The most recent publication sponsored by the project focuses on war's effect on women. The author, Julie Mertus, is an expert in international law who has worked extensively with the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. Her experience in this region, as well as her grounding in international law and the development of human rights provisions, is evident in the book.

Mertus begins by discussing generally the need for humanitarian agencies to take gender into account in their response to needy populations. She focuses on refugees, who have left their country of origin, and also on internally displaced persons, those who have moved from their homes but remain in their country of origin. In these populations, Mertus reminds the reader, women and men have different needs because of their different roles in the society and because of their different levels of vulnerability. Agencies seeking to respond to the needs of these populations must pay attention to these differences so that they can offer support that is useful, and also so that they do not act in ways that may actually exacerbate the suffering.

The central chapter of the book, which also makes for the most interesting reading, contains case studies of Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan (the latter written by researcher Judy Benjamin). The first two of these were characterized by wars which were highly publicized in the Western press, and involved large refugee flows and extremely high numbers of intervening international agencies. Afghanistan has suffered war for around twenty years, but the plight of women has become public largely due to the currently ruling Taliban and their strictures. Few international agencies are involved there.

Because she is writing for international agencies, Mertus spends most of her time in the case study section analyzing the way in which these agencies responded to the situations and particularly how they dealt with the special needs of women. She does not give international NGOs very high marks in this regard. Particularly in Bosnia, groups wanted to work with “raped women” due to the publicity focused on how rape was used as a tactic in that war. Many of these groups did not understand the situation of these women, who often were made much more vulnerable in their own communities if they came forward. Mertus suggests that an understanding of the complex roles of women in their society would help agencies design helpful interventions. Most crucial is to follow the lead of local women in determining how best to respond to such needs. Listening to the women among the target population, and responding to the needs they express, takes time and so is often neglected in designing emergency responses.

This is also important in the case of Afghanistan, where the world has focused on the limitations imposed by the strict religious laws of the Taliban. While these are certainly problematic, women in Afghanistan are also suffering the long-term effects of protracted war. A dilemma faced by agencies working there is how to negotiate between limitations of the regulations to find ways to respond to those in need. Agencies also need to decide

Women Together: Ideas for Groups, a new book from Mennonite Women, contains practical ideas for women's group development, spiritual nurture, publicity, fundraising, and service. In essays, experienced leaders give detailed guidance on renewing a group's sense of purpose, using special events for local outreach, organizing effective spiritual retreats, and more. **Women Together** also includes programs and litanies for Christmas, Easter, and Women's Day. Copies are available for \$8 U.S./ \$10 Cdn. from Mennonite Women: 722 Main St., Newton, KS 67114; (316) 283-5100; mw@gcmc.org.

Goshen College wishes to fill a one-year position in the biology department. Ph.D. or near completion preferred. Goshen College

how important it is for them to speak out against human rights violations when that may jeopardize their ability to work in that setting.

Following her look at how agencies have responded to the needs of women in these three war situations, Mertus traces the history of the development of international law. She notes that rape was not considered a war crime but rather an effect of war, and in fact was earlier seen as a crime against the families to which the raped women belonged. Recent developments in human rights law, which focus more on the rights of the individual for protection, have made a great difference for women, though there are still gaps in prosecuting these crimes.

Mertus' book is somewhat technical and is written for the world of operational humanitarian agencies. She refers often to UN-related agencies and assumes the reader has a working knowledge of them. The book is helpful to those involved in planning responses to disasters and wars, reminding them to look at the roles and expectations of women and men in their target society, and to fashion responses that take those roles into account. Mertus' counsel to begin by listening to what local persons have to say, and to invite local women to help fashion any response, rings a chord with MCC.

At the same time, anyone who is interested in thinking about the way war affects vulnerable populations and the way in which human rights law interacts with international activity may find this book of interest. Mertus gives a good over-view of the development of international law over the past fifty years and the way in which women's rights are a part of it. This is helpful knowledge in a context of war but also in gaining a greater understanding of the larger context of our world and the ways it is changing.

Judy Zimmerman Herr serves as Co-Director of the MCC Peace Office, which is a resource on peacemaking to the International Programs of MCC. She is a graduate of Goshen College, received an M.Div. from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and the mother of two sons.

also seeks a director of Division of Adult and External Studies to administer on- and off-campus programs. An advanced degree in adult studies, administration or an academic field is preferred. For more details, refer to www.goshen.edu under "employment." Send letter, resume and list of three references to: Paul Keim, Academic Dean, Goshen College, Goshen IN 46526; Dean@goshen.edu.

February 5 marked the official start of the World Council of Churches' Decade to Overcome Violence. The decade represents "a call to the churches and ecumenical partners to overcome all forms of violence." Included in this is the condemnation of violence against women and children.

Comfort Women Speak

Comfort Women Speak: Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military edited by Sangmie Choi Schellstede, featuring photographs by Soon Mi Yu. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishing, 2000.

Reviewed by Beth Graybill

"If I were to speak to the Japanese government, there is only one question I would ask: Is it right to ignore me like this as if they did nothing to me? Are they justified after trampling an innocent and fragile teenage girl and making her suffer for the rest of her life? How would you feel if your own daughter met the same fate as mine? This should never happen again in this world." (p. 105)

This photography book profiles Chinese and Korean "comfort women" during World War II. It includes stories and portraits of 19 survivors, now in their late 60s and early 70s, out of the estimated 200,000 comfort women during the war. These women were forced into wartime prostitution (now referred to by the United Nations as "sexual slavery") in a variety of ways: some women were captured, some followed "recruiters" under false pretenses of good jobs, some went unwillingly to an unknown fate to spare their families additional suffering.

While the testimony of forced sex in cruel circumstances is grim, the reader draws strength from the photographs. These women are survivors, and it shows in their faces. In the situation of forced prostitution as described by these women, simple survival was an act of resistance. Many "comfort women" did not survive the experience. Some were killed for defying orders or when they became too sick or deranged to take regular "customers." Many tried to escape and were beaten or killed for it. The book describes pregnant women who were treated with arsenic to make them miscarry, forced to have sex up until child-birth, shot dead while pregnant, and in one case, buried alive. Others lost their will to live. Writes one survivor, "As I look back, the hardest time I had was when I was thinking of suicide while so many soldiers were standing in line every day outside my cubicle, for their turn to satisfy their lust using my body." (p. 40) But in such harsh circumstances, women did continue to persist to survive, as this quote illustrates: "One soldier told me he was surprised by my resilience. . . . Whenever they inflicted a new

Women in ministry

Katherine Pitts and Pam Dinteman have both accepted positions as co-pastors of Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Katherine received an M.Div. from Princeton Theology Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey and was most recently pastor of Salina Mennonite Church, Salina, Kansas. Pam received her M.Div. from Lancaster Theological Seminary, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Evanna Hess has accepted the new position of Nurture and Service Minister at Forrest Hills Mennonite Church, Leola, Pennsylvania. Evanna and her husband Dan recently completed an MCC term of service in eastern Europe.

In August 2000, **Dale Taylor** left her position as Associate Executive Director of MCC Canada in Winnipeg, and moved to Calgary, Alberta, to take up the role of Executive Director of the Calgary Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, an immigrant and refugee services agency that is owned by the Mennonite congregations of Calgary.

hardship on us, we ‘comfort women’ would be determined over and over again to survive and to return home to Korea.” (p. 66)

Though these women survived the trauma of the experience, it has marked them. Some women in the book married and raised children, but still battle nightmares. Others—because of personal guilt and shame, due to ongoing physical problems (sterility, physical maiming, complications due to syphilis), or because after seven or eight years in the war they were no longer of marriageable age—remained single. Many of the survivors in this book are angry that the simple pleasures of marriage and children were denied them.

None spoke of the experience until late in life, in part, because their family’s honor was at stake. Many denied their past even to their closest intimates. This book is an important step in breaking silence and refusing the shame so often associated with survivors of rape.

Today these women want the Japanese government to accept responsibility for the atrocities. They want a public apology and reparations, neither of which is expected to be forthcoming. The women are angry about this. As one writes, “Even today, thinking of such tortures and such inhumane treatment, my rage has not subsided.” (p. 92) I would suggest that anger is a very appropriate and legitimate reaction to the horror and injustice done these women. And perhaps also for us as readers.

So why read a book like this? I can think of a couple reasons, one of which is mentioned in the “Foreword” by Dongwoo Lee Hahm, President of the Washington Coalition for Comfort Women Issues: “In another place or time, any one of us could have been one of these women, and their stories could have been ours.” We care because as women we feel connected. Moreover, the women chronicled in this book have “courageously shared their stories so that the world will never forget the tragedy they endured.” These kinds of atrocities against women should never happen, should, in fact, be unthinkable. Reading and writing about such violations against women, hard as the stories can be, is one way to strengthen our resolve against such offenses.

Beth Graybill serves as Women’s Concerns Director for Mennonite Central Committee U.S. and is a wife, mother, and part-time professor of Women’s Studies.

Suggested resources

Books and articles

Allen, B. *Rape Warfare: The Hidden Genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Armstrong, Alice. *Culture and Choice: Lessons from Survivors of Gender Violence in Zimbabwe*. 1998.

Barstow, Anne Llewellyn, editor. *War’s Dirty Secret: Rape, Prostitution, and Other Crimes Against Women*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000.

Elshtain, Jean Bethke and Sheila Tobias, editors. *Women, Militarism, and War: Essays in History, Politics, and Social Theory*. Rowman & Littlefield, 1990.

Enloe, Cynthia H. *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women’s Lives*. University of California Press, 2000.

Epp, Marlene. “The Memory of Violence: Soviet and East European Mennonite Refugees and Rape in the Second World War.” *Journal of Women’s History*. 9, 1 (Spring 1997):58-87.

Kaschak, Ellyn and Sara Sharratt, editors. *Assault on the Soul: Women in the Former Yugoslavia*. Haworth Press, 1999.

Lentin, Ronit, editor. *Gender and Catastrophe*. Zed Books, 1997.

Mertus, Julie A. *War’s Offensive on Women: The Humanitarian Challenge in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan*. Kumarian Press, 2000.

Near, Holly. “Smile beneath your Tears: Women’s Song and Resistance in Uruguay.” Douglas Kahn and Diane Neumaier, editors. *Cultures of Contention*. Seattle: The Real Comet Press, 1985.

Stiglmayer, Alexandra, ed. *Mass Rape: The War against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina*. University of Nebraska Press, 1994.

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Vickers, Jeanne. *Women and War*, Zed Books, 1993.

"Women in Conflict Zones." Special Issue of *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme* Vol. 19, No. 4 (Winter 2000).

Films

"Calling the Ghosts: A Story About Rape, War and Women" *Women Make Movies* (distributor), 1996. First person documentary account of two women from Bosnia-Herzegovina.

"Rape: A Crime of War" *National Film Board of Canada* (producer and distributor), 1996. Documentary about rapes in the former Yugoslavia.

Websites

Amnesty International: www.amnesty.org

Human Rights Watch: www.hrw.org

Rape is a War Crime: www.icmpd.org/women

Women in Conflict Zones Network: www.yorku.ca/research/cfr/wicz/

The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women: www.uri.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/catw

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